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ABSTRACT

This report is the first in a series examining television's treatment of specific issues in women's lives. This report focuses on the way in which children and families are portrayed on television and how this relates to the reality of families' lives. In particular, the report examines family interactions, income level, race relations, and child care issues as portrayed by television. It is concluded that in spite of a superficial semblance of reality, many of today's television shows are removed from the real world. (PCB)

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Prime Time Kids

An Analysis of Children and Families on Television

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PRIME TIME KIDS

An Analysis of Children and Families on Television

Written by Sally Steenland

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ABOUT THE COMMISSION:

The National Commission on Working Women is a nonprofit advocacy organization for women in nonprofessional occupations. These women number 33 million workers, and together they constitute 80% of the female workforce. As their advocate, the Commission works in many areas to improve the economic status of these working women. Some of our major issues include fair wages, child care, education and training, and dignity in the workplace.

Early in the Commission's history we selected the media as an area of prime concern. Research has documented the importance of television in society; it shapes attitudes, behavior, and one's view of the world. Research has also documented the treatment of women on television; their portrayals tend to be stereotyped, narrow, and unrepresentative of the rich diversity of real women's lives. Because of the power of these accumulated media images, the Commission has developed projects to increase the visibility and eradicate the stereotypes of women on television.

Beginning in 1979, our media projects have included the following activities:

* Sponsorship of the annual Women at Work Broadcast Awards competition which honors the nation's best television and radio programs about working women

* Publication of an annual critique of the fall TV season which analyzes the image of female characters on the new shows

* Creation of a national symposium for TV and radio producers, directors, and advocacy groups to discuss the status of women in the broadcasting industry

* Sponsorship of a 10-day museum exhibit of award-winning TV programs about working women and a concurrent seminar series

* Publication of a "viewer scorecard" to increase audience awareness of television's portrayal of women

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Prime Time Kids:

An Analysis of Children and Families on Television

BACKGROUND

Since 1982 the National Commission on Working Women has been publishing reports analyzing the image of women as depicted on television. Each fall we have released critiques of the new TV season; these reports have examined female TV characters on premiering shows.

Since research studies have documented that television images influence public attitudes and behavior, the Commission's reports have analyzed the contrast between the image of women in the media and women in the real world. In so doing, they have discovered wide gaps between image and reality.

Despite trends and changes over the seasons, the Commission has found that female characters on television tend to be young, white, and single. Almost all are physically attractive. They are likely to be employed in professional occupations, to be relatively affluent, and, if they have children, they are likely to be single parents.

With some notable exceptions, female TV characters still inhabit a rather narrow range of human possibility rather than reflect the full spectrum of female diversity.

This year the Commission has expanded its media activities to include a series of reports on women and television. In addition to our annual critique of the image of female TV characters on the new fall season, we will be issuing a series of reports examining television's treatment of specific issues or aspects of women's lives. This report, analyzing children and families on TV, is the first in that planned series. It was funded by a grant from the Women's Division, General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church.

INTRODUCTION

Many of today's working women are mothers, and one of their chief concerns is the well-being of their families. Many experience economic concerns, especially those who are single parents and breadwinners for their families. Many worry about the limited amount of time they have to spend each day with their children. And almost all worry about child care arrangements. Issues of economic survival, enough time to parent their children, and the quality and cost of child care are familiar to most of today's working mothers. Indeed, 20 million mothers in the labor force perform a daily, sometimes precarious, juggling act of job, family, and children.

As the Commission approached this current media project on children and families on television, we aimed to discover if any of these daily concerns and realities affecting 20 million working mothers are reflected in prime time entertainment programming.

Through the Commission's annual Broadcast Awards competition, we were familiar with news programs focusing on child care and working mothers. In fact, the current child care crisis in this country has been documented in network news specials and a host of local TV and radio news series, reports and editorials.

But what about entertainment programs? What about "Who's the Boss?" and "Webster" and "The Cosby Show"? Do today's entertainment programs reflect the pressures of work and family?

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN TODAY'S REAL WORLD

In order to evaluate TV children and their families, it is important to have a sense of the social and economic realities of real children and their families in the United States today.

There are 60 million children in the U.S. under 18 years old; 48 million of them live with both parents, and 12 million live in single parent homes. Of those children who live in single parent homes, over 90% (11 million) live with their mother, while eight percent (one million) live with their father.

Whether they live with one parent or two, the majority of children (56%) have mothers in the labor force, most of whom are employed in clerical or service jobs. The median annual income for these two-parent families in 1983 was $31,323. For single parent families headed by women, income levels were much lower, averaging $8,887. In fact, the 1984 poverty rate for female-headed households was 69%.

The economic picture for minority children and their families is more disturbing than for whites. Almost one-half of all black

children and one-third of Hispanic children live in poverty. Black children are twice as likely as white children to die in the first year of life and five times as likely to be dependent on welfare.

The poverty rate for all children has been increasing over the last decade, so that now one out of five children in this country is poor. Over 18% of these poor children live in families where at least one parent has a full-time job.

Almost all families with working parents depend on some form of child care. Increasing demand for dependable care far exceeds the supply and has resulted in a crisis in child care in this country. Furthermore, expenses for child care are exceeded only by costs of housing, food, and taxes for working families, causing financial strain. The combination of cost and lack of programs means that many families depend on a patchwork of care arrangements and that as many as seven million children under 14 are left unsupervised while their parents work.

The general picture these statistics paint is not one of financial abundance, but rather one in which families struggle to work at their jobs and raise their families at the same time. Opposed to this real-world scenario of children and families in America today is the world of children and families on television.

PROFILE OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ON TV

Television programs featuring children can be divided into two basic types: situation comedies and dramatic programs. In the 1984-85 season, there were approximately 50 prime time programs on the air; about half were situation comedies and half dramatic programs. Twenty-three of those 50 shows contained children as continuing characters -- 15 were comedies and eight were dramas.

The dramatic shows containing children include prime time soap operas (like "Dallas"), spy/cop shows (like "Cagney and Lacey"), and dramas (like "St. Elsewhere"). On such programs the children are usually rather invisible, functioning as minor characters.

In contrast, on most situation comedies, children reign. They were major characters in 75% of all situation comedies on the air in 1984-85, and they are the basis for this report on "Prime Time Kids." Aimed at a relatively young viewing audience, these programs feature children ranging from pre-schoolers to teenagers, although most are in their teens. Half of the children on TV are boys and half are girls; the vast majority are white (80%).

In contrast to children in the real world, 93% of TV children are middle class or wealthier, and only 34% live with both of their natural parents. Almost 66% live in non-nuclear family situations (homes without two parents). Nineteen percent of TV children live with their mother, while over 26% live with their father. Eleven percent live with legal guardians, and eight percent go to boarding school. Of those TV children who do live in a two-parent family, 83% have mothers who work outside the home. Despite the inherent drama in these demographics, parental concern about child care is nonexistent -- relatives, housekeepers, babysitters, and older siblings abound. Moreover, there are quite a few young children on situation comedies who seem neither to receive nor need any supervision. Although as young as six or seven years, they appear to be self-reliant and mature. On television, day care centers do not exist.

FAMILY INTERACTIONS

At least three distinctive family styles are apparent on TV situation comedies featuring children. The first style is "Kids in Charge," defined by children running the show with adults in the background, peripheral to their lives. The second style is "The Family As Democracy," characterized by a household of equals. Only in a minority of TV situation comedies does one witness the third style, "The Traditional Family," where the parents are in charge. An analysis of each of these follows.

Kids In Charge

A key aspect of shows featuring kids in charge is the absence of a strong adult figure. On "It's Your Move," the single working mother of two teenagers is a background character, unable to understand or control the devious behavior of her young son. On "Charles in Charge," the two parents are almost always either at work or at social functions, so the story revolves around a college student hired to care for their three children. On "Webster," the legal guardians often defer to the wisdom of their precocious tot who never seems to misbehave. In fact, the young Webster far surpasses George, his "father," in maturity and insight. "Facts of Life," situated at a boarding school, features teenage girls who outnumber their housemother by four to one.

Sometimes the adults are quite visible on the show but are still no match for the children. For example, Punky Brewster, an eight-year-old orphan who lives with a curmudgeonly old widower, cleans the house, prepares the meals, and cares for herself. In an adult-child role reversal, she also teaches her guardian what the important things in life really are, like loyalty and friendship.

The Family as Democracy

A relatively new phenomenon on television is the emergence of the democratic family, where children and adults are equals. Decades ago, TV parents exerted authority over their children; punishment was not uncommon, and many situation comedy episodes centered around children hiding the evidence of the broken window or dented fender from their parents, especially their fathers. On shows like "Leave It to Beaver," "Father Knows Best," and "The Donna Reed Show," the parent and child roles were clear.

But on many situation comedies today, these roles are blurred. There is often little distinction between parent and child. Today's TV parents are less likely to give their children rules or to pass on family beliefs and values. Rather, TV parents and kids tend to discover life's important values and beliefs together in a process of mutual learning.

To a certain extent, this growing absence of a traditional parental role model may result from the scarcity of nuclear two-parent families on television. There are only four situation comedies on the air today containing children who live with both of their natural parents ("The Cosby Show," "Family Ties," "Spencer," and "Charles in Charge"). Rather, the extended, disrupted, or realigned family is the rule. Sometimes children live with their real father and a housekeeper who acts as a surrogate mother ("Gimme A Break"); sometimes with their real father who is also a housekeeper (Who's the Boss?"); and sometimes with their father who has remarried ("Silver Spoons"). Especially numerous are TV shows where children live with legal guardians ("Punky Brewster," "Webster," "Diff'rent Strokes," and "Silver Spoons"). Live-in grandparents also account for part of the recent TV family growth among single parents ("Gimme A Break," "Scarecrow and Mrs. King," and "Who's the Boss?"). And on "Kate and Allie," two divorced mothers have merged households in order to split the rent.

As a result of these extensions and disruptions of the nuclear family, many TV households contain unrelated adults and children with no common past who interact with each other in nontraditional ways. Most behave cordially to each other, but lead lives relatively independent of one another ("Silver Spoons," Diff'rent Strokes"). Furthermore, most relationships within the TV household are similar in nature and equal in intimacy. Housekeepers, grandparents, parents, children and friends: all are on equal footing. Remarkably absent are varying degrees of closeness among family members -- all relationships are the same. Moreover, adults appear to have no special insights gained from life experience nor do children suffer the limitations that come from lack of such experience.

The result is a democratic family where everyone casts a vote and each point of view is equally valid. Whether the issue is a grandparent moving to a nursing home, the importance of family loyalty, or respect for others, children and adults figure it out together. In fact, if any group has the advantage, it is the children, who often are endowed with special sensitivity to the needs of others and with wisdom beyond their years about the true meaning of life.

Even within TV's intact nuclear families, democracy often reigns. On "Family Ties," liberal parents from the 60s find themselves out of touch with their conservative 1980s off-spring, especially their teenage son who invests in the stock market and wears a suit and tie to high school.

The Traditional Family

One of the hits of the 1984 television season was "The Cosby Show," referred to by many critics as an "old-fashioned family show." In contrast to many TV families, the world of "The Cosby Show" is not inhabited equally by everyone -- the authority of parent over child is clear.

In many ways, the program is an updated version of the traditional family situation comedy of the 1950s and 60s which celebrated the joys and woes of everyday life and where the parents were clearly in charge. In this updated version, a few traditions have changed: the mother is a corporate lawyer and the father spends lots of time with his kids, but the distinction between adult and child and the sense of family hierarchy is still there.

The "Kate and Allie" show contrasts two parental styles: the traditional and the democratic. Allie, a divorced mother, tends to be a traditional parent. Her children respond to established rules, she expects obedience without negotiation, and she is wary of social changes and trends. Kate, on the other hand, is a more democratic parent, raising her daughter Emma in a rather casual, spontaneous manner.

Both "The Cosby Show" and "Kate and Allie" present an interesting paradox, for they portray liberal characters who maintain traditional, sometimes conservative, family values. This juxtaposition breaks down the conventional stereotype of a liberal or conservative parent and adds complexity to the characters.

AFFLUENCE ABOUNDS

Despite the fact that the majority of TV families consists of single parent households, none of these families have low incomes. All are at least middle class, and many are quite affluent. The single mothers on "Kate and Allie" and "Scarecrow and Mrs. King" inhabit a middle class world, while the divorced mother on "Who's the Boss?" is obviously wealthy. TV's single mothers provide a dramatic contrast to the real world where most single mothers experience daily financial struggles. On some shows, such as "Silver Spoons" and "Diff'rent Strokes," the families possess great wealth. In fact, there are no poor families on TV at all. Whether parents are widowed, divorced or married, whether they are headed by males or females, they seem to have no economic struggles or budgeting problems. There are a few working class children on TV but they are rare and fit the narrow stereotype of the tough urban kid (Samantha Micelli on "Who's the Boss?" and Jo Polniazek on "Facts of Life").

Occasionally TV plots do address financial concerns. For example, a recent episode of "It's Your Move" showed Matthew the teenage son convincing his mother to ask her boss for a raise. Although this show includes regular references to the single mother's financial struggles, her plight belies the obvious, since her two teenagers own expensive musical and recording equipment and always wear stylish clothes.

If there is any variation in the socio-economic status of TV children, it is found in the contrast between those who are on situation comedies and those who are on dramatic programs. Only 13% of situation comedy children are extremely rich, while 38% of all children on dramatic programs are very wealthy. (Most of these children are babies and toddlers on prime time soap operas).

The economic reality of racial discrimination is not significant on TV -- black children are as likely to be affluent as white ("The Cosby Show," "Diff'rent Strokes," "Webster," "Silver Spoons"). The only minority children on television are blacks, 100% of whom are middle class or wealthier.

This TV fantasy land of beautiful homes, fancy clothes, and expensive gadgets and accessories continues a trend of affluent TV characters begun in the early 1980s when prime time soap operas such as "Dallas" and "Dynasty" became tremendously popular in the ratings. These shows have successfully retained their large numbers of viewers, resulting in newer shows following their formula and a general upscaling of almost all shows on TV. Gone from family life are comfortable shabbiness, lived-in furniture, and ordinary clothing. They no longer suffice and have been replaced by homes with a show-room look and clothes that appear to have just come off an expensive rack.

THE ISSUE OF RACE

Of all children on TV, almost one out of five is black. Forty percent of these black children consist of Cosby family kids; the rest are on "Punky Brewster," "Facts of Life," "Diff'rent Strokes," "Webster," and "Silver Spoons."

Other than "The Cosby Show," which contains four children living in a nuclear family, no black children on television live with their natural parents. On "Diff'rent Strokes" and "Webster," black children live with white guardians; on other programs they live with relatives such as uncles or grandmothers.

While almost half of all real black children are poor, no black TV children live in poverty. Eighty percent are upper middle class or wealthy. Webster lives in a modern high rise apartment in Chicago with his adopted white parents ("Webster"), while Arnold and Willis live with their extremely wealthy white guardian ("Diff'rent Strokes"). The only two middle class black children on TV are Cherry Johnson ("Punky Brewster") and Tootsie Ramsey, who goes to boarding school ("Facts of Life").

Except for "The Cosby Show," all other black children on TV appear in white settings with other white characters. These programs portray a powerful melting pot, where race is incidental and people are color-blind. Prejudice is virtually non-existent, except in certain plots that have "messages," and black and white culture blend together and co-exist peacefully. Black children on TV have best friends who are white, and white guardians encounter no special obstacles in raising non-white children. The picture is generally one of harmony and togetherness. When problems do occur, they are often shared by both races and solved together, illustrating the principle that people's shared humanity is more important than physical, outward differences.

All of TV's black children are on situation comedies, since dramatic programs, especially prime time soap operas, are virtually all-white. Except for "Webster" which is on ABC, all other shows containing black children are on NBC.

WHO'S WATCHING THE KIDS?

If the nuclear family is an endangered species on television today, the homemaker mother is practically extinct. Gone are the days of "Leave It To Beaver" and "Father Knows Best" where moms vacuumed the house, baked cookies for their children after school, and welcomed their husbands home from work with a kiss and a delicious dinner. Today's TV stay-at-home moms are a far cry from their predecessors: Sue Ellen of "Dallas" and Crystle Carrington of "Dynasty" live a life of leisure, while Allie of "Kate and

Allie" is a divorced mother torn between being at home with her children and getting a job.

Almost all other mothers on TV work outside the home. They are lawyers, architects, cops, ad agency presidents, secretaries, spies, and oil tycoons. Despite the demands of these professions, child care doesn't seem to be a problem. On most shows, it's not clear at all who's watching the kids -- they apparently fend for themselves. On other programs, care is automatically provided in a variety of ways: live-in relatives, live-in babysitter/housekeepers, older siblings.

A significant number of TV shows portray children living with their father, who is usually a widower ("Gimme a Break," "Benson," "Who's the Boss," "St. Elsewhere," "Love Boat"). In a curious twist of reality, 55% of all TV children living with a single parent live with their father, while only 45% live with their mother.

There appears to be no significant differences between TV households headed by males or females. Single mothers and fathers on these shows spend about the same amount of time with their children and earn about the same amount of money. Just as TV's melting pot blends racial differences into a harmonious whole, so the gender melting pot removes many of the differences between women and men that exist in the real world.

TV'S SOCIAL MESSAGES

Although television is basically an entertainment medium, it is also a powerful teacher, delivering both deliberate and unintentional messages to its audience. Although these intentional messages vary widely on TV's situation comedies, one common theme is that of pro-social behavior, emphasized by honesty and open communications. Virtually every plot each week has either an overt or subtle message which can be summarized in a sentence, such as: it's important to tell the truth, it's good to be generous, parents and children should trust one another, siblings should be loyal to each other, and old people have feelings. The message of one episode of "Facts of Life," for example, was "rich people have feelings, too." This episode featured a conflict between Blair, the wealthy student, and Jo, her working class friend, who broke Blair's wristwatch and didn't apologize because Blair had many other watches.

Sometimes the program's messages reflect current social issues. For example, a recent episode of "Silver Spoons" concerned Ricky's babysitting a little girl who he suspected had been abducted by her father from his ex-wife. Ricky told his father who, in turn, contacted the police; at the end of the show, the little girl was returned to her mother in an emotional reunion and the father was arrested. The program was openly pedagogic -- throughout the plot development, the TV characters laid out the

proper steps to follow in such a situation, delivering lines like, "It's too bad little Beth didn't tell someone right away what had happened to her, like her teacher or a minister or the police."

Ironically, the intended pro-social messages of TV's programs sometimes run counter to their unintentional messages. For example, a recent episode of "Punky Brewster" emphasizing the importance of respecting other people's feelings, happened to contain scenes in which Punky and her classmates were disrespectful to their teacher, an outdated stereotype of an ineffective, timid schoolmarm.

At other times, the pro-social messages of programs are redeeming tag lines near the end of a show, following 25 minutes of duplicitous and manipulative action. Like the old Hollywood gangster movies . . . where justice wins out, but the audience still gets to see violence, gun play, and thievery . . . television shows frequently find humor in the breaking of accepted rules of common human decency, but either punish or enlighten the wrong-doer in the end. A TV situation comedy that regularly follows this formula is "It's Your Move," where Matthew, the conniving, ambitious teenage son, is either brought up short by his misdeeds or learns his lesson -- but only after most of the show revels in his mischief. On one recent episode, Matthew spent the entire show plotting to humiliate his sister by secretly tape recording her slumber party, stealing her private journal, and selling copies of the diary at school. However, he abandoned his plan at the last moment, after hearing his sister defend him while he was eavesdropping on her. Nor was his sister better behaved. At the slumber party, she and her friends were cruel, gossipy and hypocritical toward each other.

CONCLUSION

The Commission's recent monitoring of television programs demonstrates that, despite a superficial semblance of reality, many of today's TV shows are as removed from the real world and its concerns as the situation comedies of the 1950s. Hollywood has largely failed to grapple with the important issues of people's lives and to turn them into the comedy and drama that form entertainment television.

This report looked for the reflection in prime time programming of some of the daily concerns and economic realities affecting working mothers, especially the pressures of work and family and the need for child care. Those reflections were virtually nonexistent.

In the world of television, affluence is spread among all families. As a result, no single mothers on TV live in poverty or struggle economically to raise their children. No children lack

essentials or are deprived of extras. In fact, TV families' lives are models of relative ease and affability. Race and sex discrimination don't exist, except in mild forms, and bigotry and prejudice are usually overcome at the end of the show by good--hearted people. Young children are either so self-reliant they don't need child care, or it is provided automatically by loving relatives or live-in help.

One could argue that this world of television entertainment provides a welcome escape for viewers tuning in after a hard day, and that this escape is a relief from the reality of low wages, poor child care, and great fatigue. However, this fantasy world, where viewers see virtually no reflection of themselves, is also discouraging and vapid, because there is no dramatic tension between TV's plots and their own lives. Viewers rarely see television characters struggling with the intractable problems of the real world. How can there be empathy? How can viewers suspend their disbelief? The fact that most TV programs have "morals" means little if the situations and characters have no analogy to real people.

On another level, viewers should question the messages these programs send regarding the important issues of society. Because of its enormous power, television is a determinant in the public's own social and political agenda-setting. Since financial worries and child care are virtually invisible on television programs, these shows contribute to faulty perceptions about families and children. As the statistics quoted earlier in this report illustrate, making ends meet, securing affordable child care, and developing support systems for working mothers are not easily solved on an individual basis and need societal support.

The medium of television is too important to ignore such real world concerns. Rather than shy away from reality, TV should embrace it, for real people's lives form the heart of entertainment and of art. TV writers and producers, many of whom are working parents themselves, should dip into this well of reality as they create TV programs, for this source contains the basic ingredients of drama, humor, and conflict which is the essence of entertainment that enlightens as well.